PLANET TEXAS 2050
A UT Grand Challenge

Escaping a Climate Crisis

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Design helps researchers turn data into an experience.

By Doreen Lorenzo

Part of an escape room, designed as a scientific observatory in the Gulf of Mexico, glows red with emergency lights during a hurricane. Image credit: Logan Smith

We learn better when we experience something.

Over the course of my career as a leader in design, both in the private sector and in academia, I've seen design used in expected ways to create graphics and products and even to change human behavior. But as more people become aware of the value of *design* in its own right, it has moved beyond the arts and into every discipline, from medicine and engineering to urban planning and organizational management. And possibly for the first time ever, we can now use design to translate complicated data and information into a visual — even visceral — event that teaches us something new by immersing us in it.

Take climate change, for example. There is *so much* rich information that exists about air and water quality, agriculture, geology, and weather patterns, but it can also be overwhelming and hard to process. Hurricane Harvey and Australia's wildfires show us how climate change threatens our livelihood, but even those events can feel far away and abstract in terms of preventability and preparation.

So what do we do? Well, I'm proud to say that the College of Fine Arts at The University of Texas at Austin has been working with the Planet Texas 2050 grand challenge team as we teach courses in which students learn to build climate-themed, immersive experiences. Students and faculty came together with skills in game design, set design, projection & lighting, sound, art and engineering to develop and construct a fully operational escape room prototype that places participants in the shoes of scientists on an observational platform in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico during a devastatingly powerful hurricane that's intensifying quickly. They must warn coastal residents of the impending storm surge while coordinating their own helicopter rescue before evacuation becomes impossible.

Students and faculty from across UT's College of Fine Arts designed a futuristic climate-based escape room using input from scientists.

In fact, as part of this project, the college offered seven classes last semester across multiple disciplines, including courses from the Department of Theatre and Dance and from Arts and Entertainment Technologies in the School of Design and Creative Technologies. Texas Applied Arts in Texas Performing Arts supported the project by offering facilities and fabrication space, as well as supporting staff.

At the same time, Fine Arts faculty consulted with Planet Texas 2050 researchers from the Marine Science Institute, the Center for Water and the Environment, and even UT's own meteorologist Troy Kimmel to design a realistic experience based on actual data and future projections of storm intensity. Participants come away understanding the devastating effects these weather events have on our lives, in part because what they've encountered — while imagined — isn't entirely fictionalized.